Collision of Ideas Fans Violent Fuss

By Paul Hood
(Daily Oklahoman Staff Writer)

BARTLESVILLE, Nov. 4—Was Bartlesville justified in firing Ruth Brown as librarian after nearly 31 years of service?

One bitter faction here says no, she was fired for her liberal ideas and that's an infringement of civil liberties. Another group, including the city's elective officials, says yes, any employer could be expected to dismiss a worker for insubordination such as she had displayed.

It is a dispute that has assumed community-wide proportions here in recent months, chilling old friendships and bringing charges of communist activity and counter-charges of witch-hunting about as main arguments and side issues concern such things as censorship, racial equality and different interpretations of Americanism.

Behind it all is a collision of liberal and conservative ideas typical of present-day society.

The specific issue of whether the gray-haired spinster was illegally fired yesterday will go into court here next week. But there seems little likelihood that a court ruling can settle the issue.

These are the basic facts in the case on which most of the disputants can agree.

Miss Brown, 59-year-old, decisiive, has been presiding over the Bartlesville library since 1926. During that time the library, housed in one wing of the Civic Center, has gradually grown without exciting particular public notice.

It had been operated under an old library ordinance which established a six-member board of control with provisions for rotating the membership in a four-year cycle. Actually membership of the board seldom varied and the group's principal duty consisted of meeting once a year to handle budgetary matters.

More and more in recent years Miss Brown has expressed strong personal convictions on the racial problem. She has been identified actively with plans designed to gain equality for Negroes in the segregated Oklahoma community. This has led to work with CORE (Committee on Racial Equality), an organization devoted to translating the equality theory into action.

Starting about a year ago the librarian began to take Negroes with her to various community meetings, to church and even to challenge the long-standing Jim Crow policy in certain city stores. Resistance and criticism were aroused in some quarters.

Opening of a lavish new YWCA building added fuel to the controversy.

Some Negro groups met in the center, financed through a public subscription campaign. Jim Crow adherents were licenced, although the YW directors stood pat and voted to continue to permit Negro groups to use the facilities. Miss Brown was active in discussions of the issue.

Rumors began to fly. Critics began to circulate reports that the librarian was putting out marked copies of what they termed "subversive" articles to public-school students who used the library for reference purposes.

Another rumor had Miss Brown displaying a picture of Paul Robeson on the library walls.

As these stories spread, several civic groups became interested, pressed on by members who were particularly alarmed over what they considered a threat to the peaceful community.

The American Legion was among these, as were the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

In February about 40 Bartlesville residents appeared at a meeting of the city commission to air complaints against the library and demands an investigation. Mrs. C. S. Warren, wife of an oil company executive, was spokesman for the visitors. "Subversive" literature had been found in the library, she told Mayor R. H. Hudson (now deceased). "The Nation," "The New Republic" and "Soviet Russia Today" were cited as examples. What's more, Mrs. Warren said Miss Brown had been too active on the race question, and she referred to specific occasions.

What Miss Brown did on race relations was her own affair, Hudson told the visitors, but he suggested the complaints take up library matters with the library board. He named a citizens' committee to handle the matter with Mrs. Warren as chairman. Other members included Mrs. George Wilks, Mrs. Basic Maynor, Mrs. J. J. Ribbel, Mrs. M. J. Irwin, Mrs. Frank Sisson and W. D. McGinley.

Russell Davis, chairman of the library board, called his group together and the citizens' body showed up to press its complaints.

The committee demanded the offending magazines be removed from the open shelves. The board argued for retaining them for the sake of presenting a balanced diet of information to library patrons.

When the two groups submitted preliminary reports to the city commission at the next meeting, fireworks broke loose. There was a lot of heckling of speakers and some who spoke for the library board were booted from the audience and called communists.

"Who are you?" Mayor Hudson challenged one speaker who sought to intervene on behalf of the library board. "What right have you to challenge this group of respected citizens? Are you a communist?"

The citizens' committee report to the commission repeated the charges about "subversive" literature and demanded its removal.

"We cannot subscribe to the untried theory that persons of immature years should have access to commu-

Miss Ruth Brown
Her job is at stake.

E. S. Dunaway
He blames insubordination.
Miss Brown, fearing trouble, consulted with some friends, including members of the old library board.

When she appeared before the board, Miss Brown insisted that she would answer questions about her personal conduct. She maintained that it was unfair to criticize her conduct while she was at school. After a long discussion, the board voted to dismiss her, and she was not reappointed to the committee.

For almost the same reason, the commissioners refused to accept the decision of the mayor. Commissioners later explained that they wanted to make such a record which would be the source of "essays" by trouble makers later.

The militant crusader talks freely about her interest in the race question and the steps she has taken to promote the CORE campaign. She recalls that last school year two young, intelligent, and well-versed Negro women came to the faculty of the Barterville Negro school. They were "ready," says Miss Brown, to participate in the drive to break down segregation barriers.

Angered at what they interpreted as a threat and also at the librarian's refusal to answer questions, the commissioners abruptly dismissed Miss Brown.

"She had reached the bottom of the steps before she was out of a job," Mayor Dunaway explains. The news was broken to her by telephone a few minutes later.

A few days later friends of Miss Brown descended upon the board meeting in force and demanded to know the reason for the action. City officials still maintain they gave her subordination as the reason. Spokesmen for the protesting group charge the commissioners evaded any direct answer.

Miss Brown was convinced she knew what had actually happened.

"I believe as do many others," she said after being fired, "that my dismissal is attributable to certain of my personal opinions and outside actions which are disatisfying to members of the board of city commissioners.

"I have always believed that discrimination on account of race, creed, or color is contrary to democratic and Christian principles, and I have tried to live as a Christian in a democracy in accordance with this belief.

"This has in no way interfered with my duties as city librarian, for the recently discharged library board is a work completely satisfactory. The newly appointed library board has given me no reason to believe they have found me otherwise."

Friends of Miss Brown then organized to fight the case, passed the hat for contributions and employed Attorney S. H. Higginbotham, former chief justice of the state supreme court, to represent the librarian. Suit was brought on behalf of Miss Brown and Mrs. Darlene Essay, a member of the old library board, to prove the new library ordinance invalid and force reinstatement of the old regime.

Judge James T. Shugrue of Barterville started to hear the matter but then disqualified himself and Judge Jesse Miracle of Okemah was assigned to open the hearing Thursday.

About 350 persons contributed to the fund for financing the suit, says Mrs. Essay. A steering committee has been formed, but the only organization consisted of selection of Mrs. E. F. Rice, wife of an oil company executive, as treasurer.

Although only a technical legal point can be cleared by the lawsuit, the friends of Miss Brown are fighting the case on the grounds that civil liberties are at stake. They contend Miss Brown's interest in racial matters is the real reason for her dismissal, not subordination as charged. That, they argue, is a mere subterfuge.

"I am primarily interested in proving that ordinance illegal because of the principle involved, not just to get back the job," Miss Brown explains.

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Miss Brown started on a planned program of taking the teachers with her to community functions such as the Town Hall lectures, joint meetings of local social clubs, and the like. She described the results as quite satisfactory.

"I guess really where it started," she mused, thinking back on her difficulties with a portion of the community, "was in taking a young Negro woman to church." She, too, was an Episcopalian and they went together several times. We were welcomed by more than three-fourths of the congregation, and the minister made a special point of inviting us to come.

"But one day a woman in the church told me about the awful consequences if the Negro continued to come. The word got back to the Negro woman and she stopped going with me."

She describes in her abrupt manner of speech the way she and the Negro teachers carefully planned to protest in one of the city's larger drugstores. She knew the store would refuse to serve them, but thought it desirable to force the issue.

It was a case of action like this that embarrassed the city, officials explained. At one of the citizens appointed to the new board put it: "It's always been my idea that anybody who first in a public show of carrying the torch for any cause.

Nevertheless, city officials insist, the question of demonstrating was not the real reason for her dismissal.

Mayor Dunaway, a lean, harrased looking man with strong convictions, deplores the fact that the wide publicity given the matter plays into the hands of trouble makers. This is what communists want, he argues, something that will create dissension.

"Publishing things like this plays into their hands just as I'm playing into their hands by letting you go," he told an interviewer.

He pointed out that the officials have said as little as possible about the matter because everything that is said adds fuel to the fire. He is prepared to write new "essays" by trouble makers.

The mayor displayed a letter received from a man in Austin, Texas, severely criticizing the city for firing Miss Brown and interpreting the matter as an infringement of civil liberties.

"We had bushees of 'em," he commented.

Most of them, the mayor noted, followed the same general theme and to his mind were solicited by someone from Barterville.

Is communism involved in this dispute?

"Of course it is," Dunaway snorts.

"Why right over that telephone I had someone involved in this tell me 'We're going to keep going to keep up what we want.' If that isn't the communist way I don't know what it is."

Others who side with the mayor and commissioners in the dispute are more chariably in their analysis of the opposition.

"No, I don't think there are any real communists involved," one commissioner said. "But I do believe that this is like this suits the communists' purposes."
That apparently is a view widely held. Many citizens of the community concede that those on both sides of the fence are equally sincere in their convictions, but deplore the unrest that such controversies create.

Meanwhile the library has been kept open under the guidance of Miss Virginia Lashey, a retired school teacher. But the magazines, "The Nation" and "The New Republic," storm centers in the conflict, are no longer on the open racks. They are tucked away on a shelf under the librarian's desk and can be had by interested, mature library patrons on call.

The new library board has not employed a permanent head librarian, pending outcome of the lawsuit. But there are at least four applicants being studied for the job.

As the showdown in court approaches, the citizens' committee which brought things to a head has virtually disbanded and no further work is contemplated for the group.

Meanwhile, the central figure in the case, Miss Brown, sits in her small bungalow, half a block from the library she served so long, and waits for legal judgment on her claim to be reinstated.